



Department  
for Education

# Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey

Summary of returns Waves 1 to 8

September 2020

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## Headline facts and figures

- The majority of children looked after (CLA), children on a child protection plan (CPP) and other children in need (CIN) have had their cases reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak (95%, 96% and 86% respectively).
- The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has reduced over the time period, with 4% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 8, compared to 13% in Wave 1.
- Around four in five local authorities have reported a rise in weekly foster and residential placements costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (82% and 83% respectively in Wave 8).
- The total number of referrals during Wave 8 was 12% higher than the usual number of referrals in the same period over the past three years. An increase was seen by around 60% of local authorities.
- Referrals from police, individuals and health services were higher in Wave 8 than the same week in 2018 (+24%, +20% and +6% respectively).
- The total number of referrals reported in Waves 1 to 8 of the survey was 82,940, this is around 15% lower than the same period over the past three years.
- The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 8 of the survey was 3,460. This is around 33% lower than the same period over the past three years.

# Background

## Survey

The Department for Education (DfE) established a survey of local authorities in England to help understand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak on Children's Social Care. Local authorities are asked to report to DfE every 2 weeks with the exception of 4 weeks between Waves 7 and 8. The questions asked and dates of each wave can be found in Annex A. Local authorities were asked to report on the following areas:

- Contact with children supported by the local authority Children's Social Care
- Children's Social Care workforce
- Cost pressures
- System pressures

## Summary of data

### Contact with children supported by the LA Children's Social Care

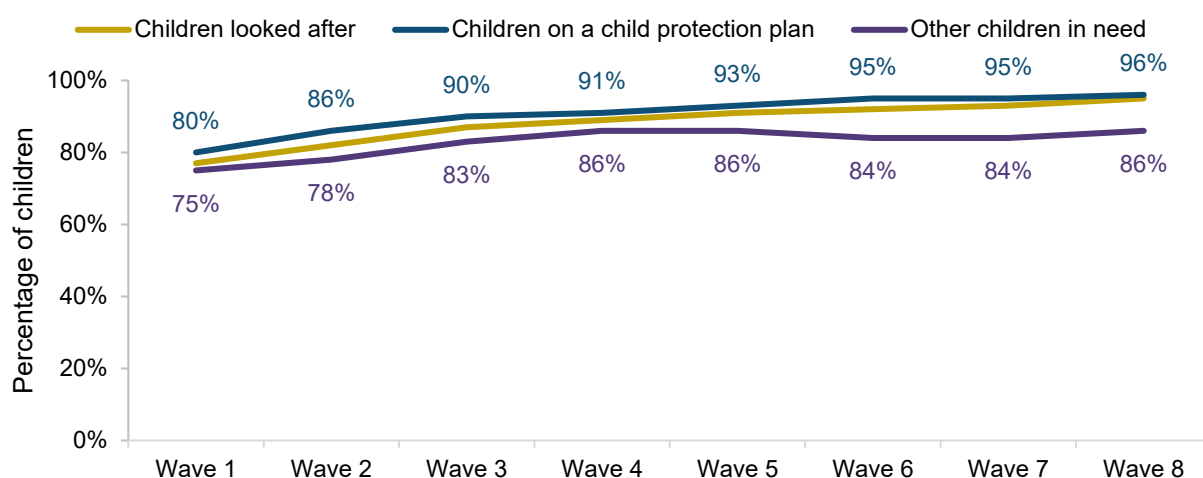
Local authorities were asked about whether cases had been reviewed for Children Looked After (CLA), children on a Child Protection Plan (CPP) and other Children in Need (CIN), and whether they'd seen or contacted children in the last two weeks. A new question was added to Wave 3 of the survey which asks how many of the children in each group have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

Contact is defined as communication that has taken place with the child/young person, including both face to face visits and remote communication, such as telephone calls or other types of messaging.

A review involves the professional oversight of a child's circumstances, with a judgement made about the level of risk to that child either statutorily and/or in the context of coronavirus (COVID-19).

The proportion of children who have had their cases reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has been increasing over time for CLA, children on a CPP and other CIN. The percentage of children who have been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks has remained stable. In Wave 8, 70% of CLA, 95% of children on a CPP and 63% of other CIN had been contacted by their social worker in the last four weeks.

**Figure 1: Cases reviewed in light of COVID-19**

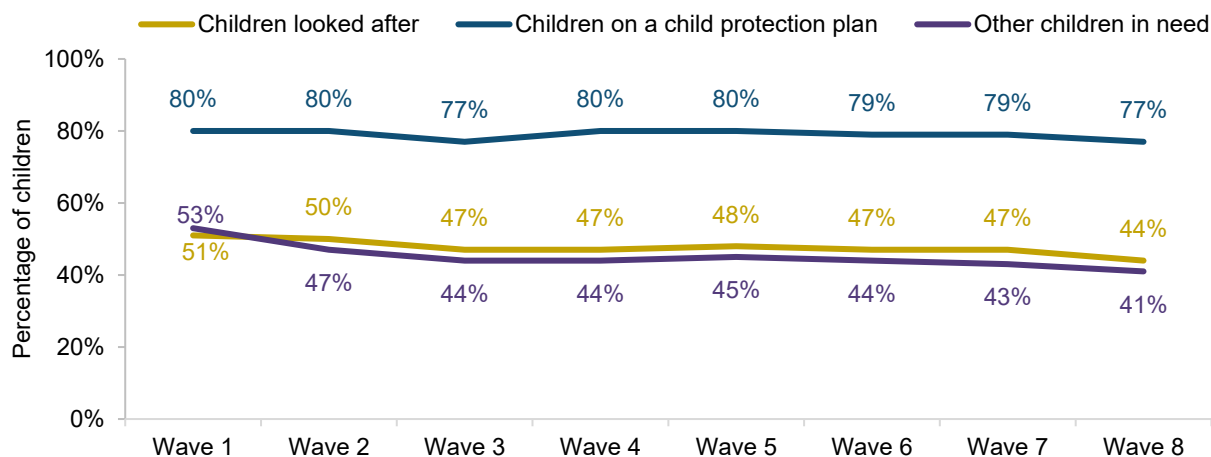


**Notes:**

Guidance to local authorities on the correct methodology to calculate other CIN was improved at Wave 3. Local authorities were prompted again at Wave 6. This may explain decreases in percentages for this group over time.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

**Figure 2: Contact with social workers in the last two weeks**

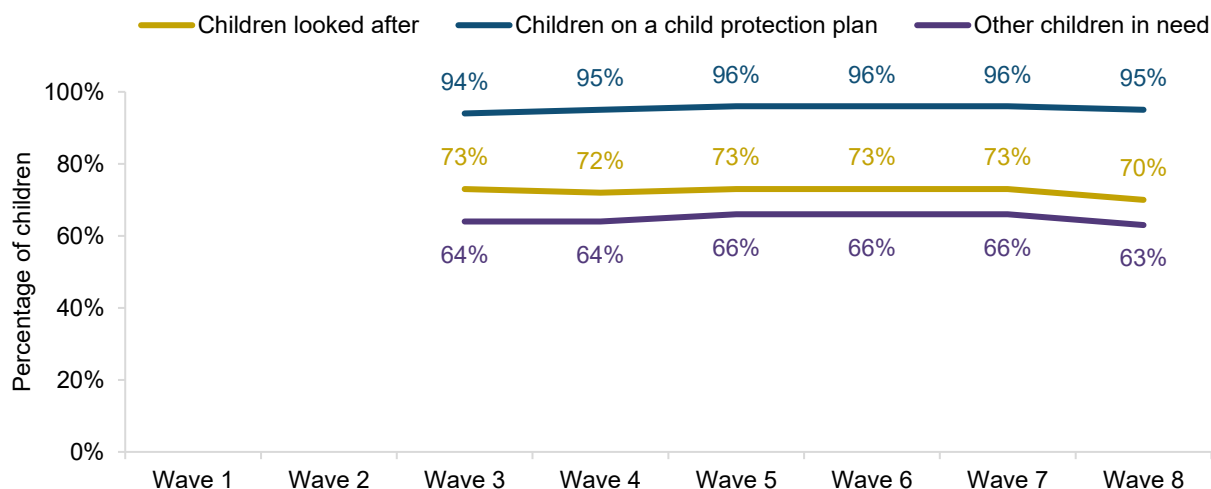


**Notes:**

Guidance to local authorities on the correct methodology to calculate other CIN was improved at Wave 3. Local authorities were prompted again at Wave 6. This may explain decreases in percentages for this group over time.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

**Figure 3: Contact with social workers in the last four weeks**



**Notes:**

Guidance to local authorities on the correct methodology to calculate other CIN was improved at Wave 3. Local authorities were prompted again at Wave 6. This may explain decreases in percentages for this group over time.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Analysis of the open text questions in the earlier survey waves (1-4) described the local authority activities to safeguard children that they were not in contact with. These comprised of: risk assessing and RAG rating cases, working with other agencies to manage risk, and working with schools to ensure welfare checks and contact was taking place with vulnerable children not attending school.

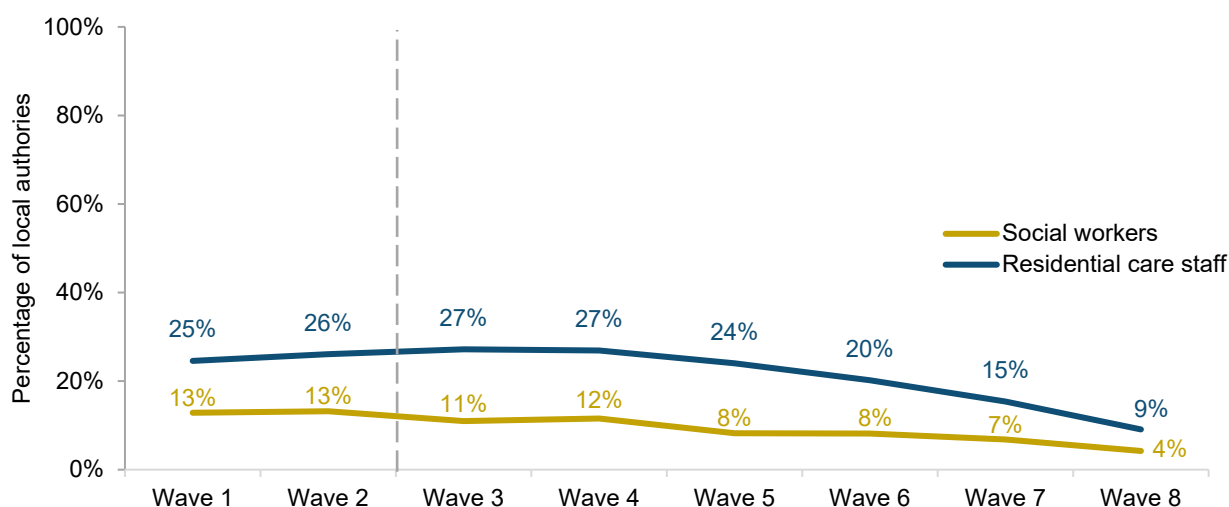
Across the subsequent survey waves (5-8), responses provided in the open text questions show that this approach has been adapted and there is more reporting of face to face contact resuming. Since Wave 5, local authority activities reported focusing on hidden harms and early help to identify children who may be at risk, and developing innovative ways to manage risk and monitor contact, for example through new reporting tools to safeguard the children that they were not in contact with.

## Children's Social Care Workforce

Local authorities were asked about the availability of their staff during coronavirus (COVID-19); both the social worker workforce and residential care staff. A new question was added to Wave 3 of the survey which asks whether the local authority directly employs residential workers. Note that local authorities were previously reporting 0% if they do not directly employ residential workers. As such the sample consisted of fewer local authorities from Wave 3, and comparisons across waves should be treated with caution.

The proportion of social workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has reduced over the time period, with 4% of local authorities reporting over 10% of social workers unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wave 8, compared to 13% in Wave 1. The proportion of residential care workers not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19) has also reduced, from 27% in Wave 3 to 9% in Wave 8. It should be noted that some local authorities have small residential care workforces and therefore any small changes in staff availability may result in changes in the proportion of staff unavailable due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

**Figure 4. Proportion of local authorities that reported over 10% of staff not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)**



**Notes:**

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Overall, feedback gathered from the open text responses suggest that workforce availability linked to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has not been as problematic as originally expected. Although, a local authority in one of the initial survey waves stressed that the demand on frontline staff was unprecedented and another local authority was concerned about staff isolation with the advent of staff working from home. In the early waves of the survey, local authorities provided examples where staff had



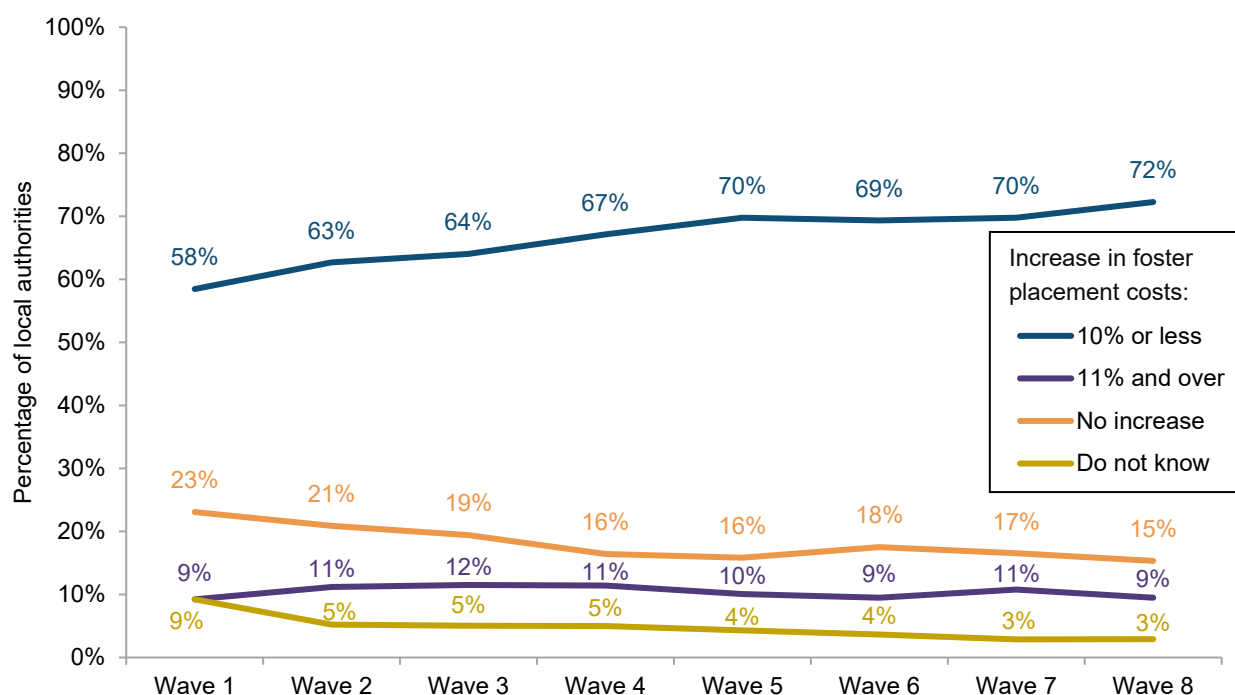
been re-deployed and staff training was provided on the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on practice.

## Cost Pressures

Local authorities were asked to estimate their weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19), for looked after children in foster and residential care placements.

Around four in five local authorities have reported a rise in weekly foster and residential placements costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (82% and 83% respectively in Wave 8).

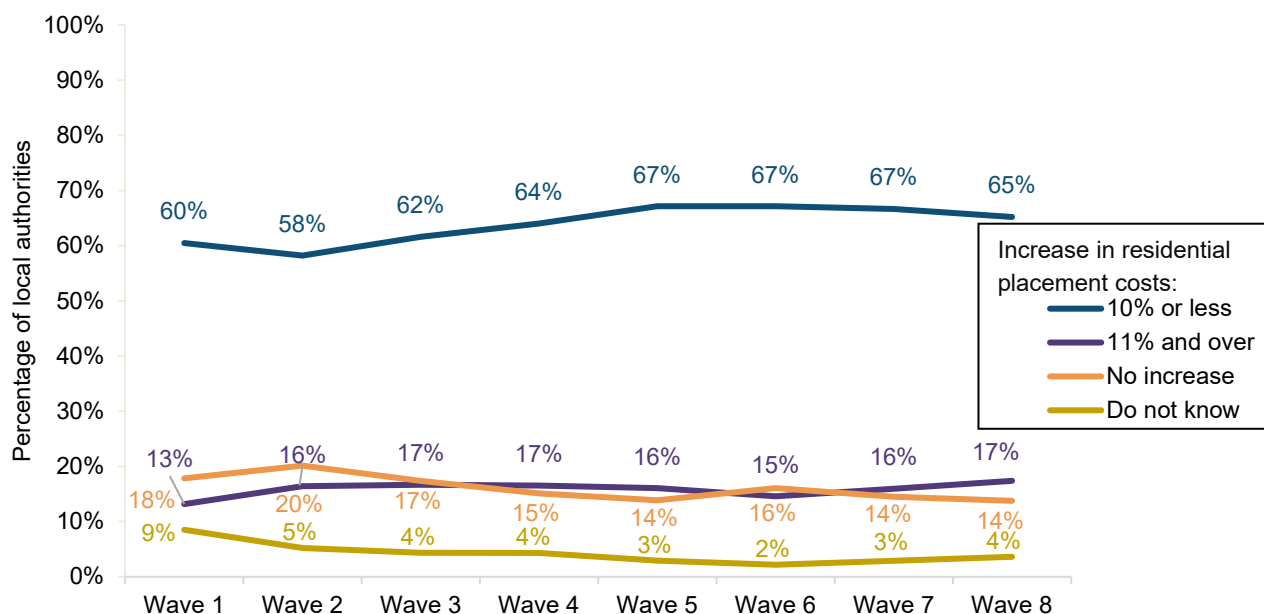
**Figure 5: Estimated increase in weekly costs for foster care placements due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19)**



**Notes:**

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

**Figure 6: Estimated increase in weekly costs for residential care placements due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19)**



**Notes:**

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text questions, some local authorities provided examples of increased costs arising as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. For example:

- a small number of local authorities received requests for increased fees from residential care providers (one said this is quantified to be circa 10% of basic fee).
- some local authorities described financial pressures coming from a larger than usual number of children in care (e.g. reduced step-downs and inability to secure move on accommodation for older children) and CPPs as fewer CPPs are concluding at this time.
- some local authorities have increased the package of support to foster carers to cover additional costs of care provision during lockdown.
- a few local authorities told us that they have experienced increased costs from securing placements for children with additional needs and from increased placement breakdowns. *“...placement costs increased by over 50% from March 2020 levels due to the additional packages of care required for new placements”* and another said *“an increase in placement breakdowns related to young people struggling with lockdown restrictions and resulting in a move to a higher tariff placement to manage those challenges”*

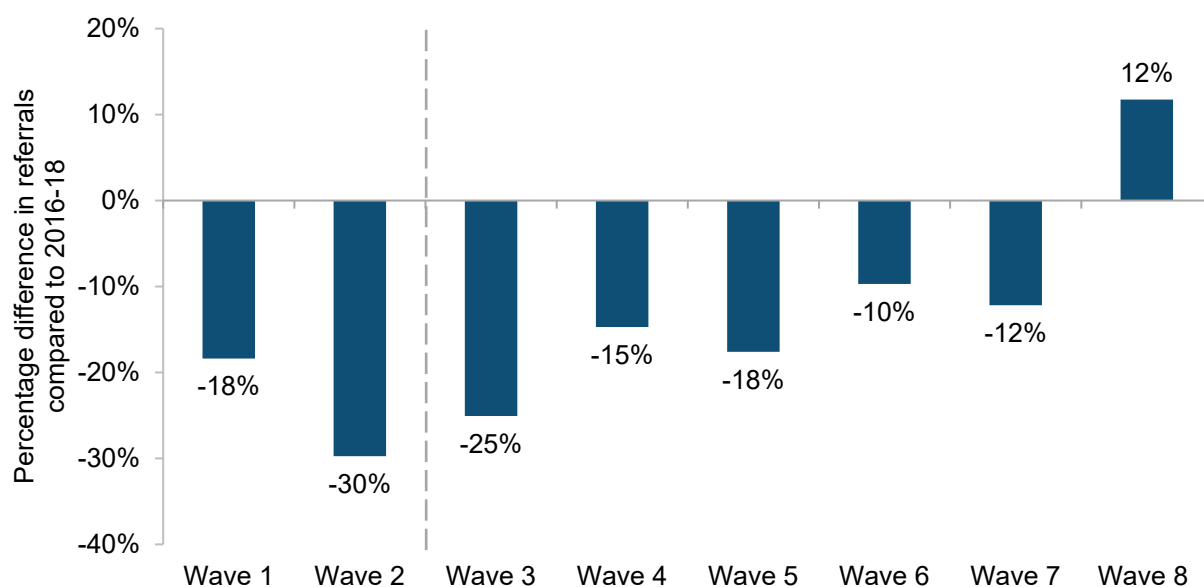
## Referrals to Children's Social Care services

In Waves 1 and 2, local authorities were asked to report the number of referrals to children's social care services they received in the last week. From Wave 3, local authorities were asked for the number of referrals to children's social care services the week before last to account for the lag in reporting that affected Waves 1 and 2. As such, the figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

From Wave 3 onwards local authorities were also asked to report the sources of their referrals.

The total number of referrals from 143 local authorities was 10,500 in Wave 8, compared to 10,790 from 146 local authorities in Wave 7. In Wave 8 the total number of referrals was 12% higher than the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018. An increase was seen by around 60% of local authorities. The total number of referrals to children's social care services reported in Waves 1 to 8 of the survey was 82,940, this is around 15% lower than the same period over the past three years.

**Figure 7: Difference in the total number of referrals compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018**



### Notes:

The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues. Comparator data for these LAs was also removed.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

Referrals from police, individuals and health services were higher in Wave 8 than the same week in 2018 (+24%, +20% and +6% respectively).

**Table 1: Number of referrals received from each source over Waves 3-8 compared to the same weeks in 2018**

Wave	Referral source				
	Individuals	Schools	Health services	Police	Other sources
Wave 3	-16%	-82%	-20%	11%	-4%
Wave 4	-1%	-72%	-3%	7%	1%
Wave 5	-9%	-65%	-8%	12%	-4%
Wave 6	-2%	-60%	5%	10%	-3%
Wave 7	8%	-60%	-2%	11%	-10%
Wave 8	20%	-28%	6%	24%	-2%

**Notes:**

Other sources include local authority services, legal agencies and children's centres.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

In the open text questions, some local authorities described the types of cases received. For example:

- increases in cases involving domestic abuse. One local authority reported setting up a Domestic Abuse Hub and freephone number in response to this.
- the complexity of some cases being seen has increased in some local authorities. One local authority said they had seen "... *increased complexity regarding strategy discussions and Section 47 investigations...*". Another told us "...*we have seen an increase in complexity, with several cases needing urgent legal intervention*".

Local authorities also said they are anticipating a spike in demand as schools reopen in the Autumn. Some local authorities have done work to predict and plan for the anticipated demand spike, for example, by moving resource to assessment teams and strengthening the 'front door'. Other local authority examples include:

- "*we utilised the summer holiday period to prepare for the anticipated surge in demand following the return of young people to schools. This has meant seeking to close cases where safe to do so to create capacity, and to ensure all social workers have taken leave and so are rested and available to support families throughout the Autumn*".
- "*a strategy to support this is being considered around recruitment of staff to all vacant posts and to honour the retention of agency staff to support demand*".
- "*service recovery plans have been completed for all services areas*" and in parallel "*using our MASH Strategic Group to plan with partners regarding the autumn term and children returning to school.*"

## Children who have started to be looked after

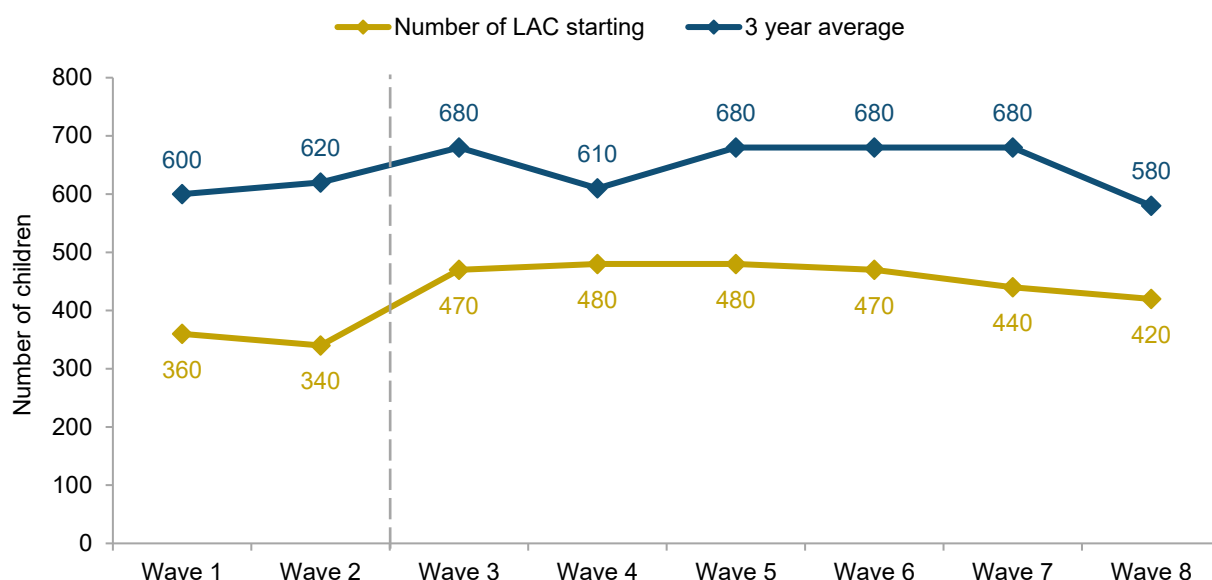
Local authorities were asked to report the number of children that started to be looked after. From Wave 3 the survey asks for the number of looked after children starting the week before last to account for the lag in reporting that affected Waves 1 and 2. As such, the figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

Note that due to small numbers, there are large fluctuations in weekly data.

The total number of CLA starting during Wave 8 was 420 compared to 580 over the same period in previous years (-27%). The total number of children who have started to be looked after reported in Waves 1 to 8 of the survey was 3,460, this is around 33% lower than the same period over the past three years. There has been a downward trend in the number of children starting to be looked after in recent years<sup>1</sup>. Therefore we may expect the numbers returned in this survey to be lower than the same period over the past three years.

For the majority of local authorities there has been a difference of up to 5 children compared to the 3 year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018.

**Figure 8: Total number of children looked after starting per week and 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018**



### Notes:

The figures from Wave 3 onwards are not directly comparable to Waves 1 and 2.

See Annex B for the number of local authorities that responded to the question per wave.

<sup>1</sup> Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019

In the open text questions in later waves of the survey a small number of local authorities reported they are experiencing an increase in the stock of looked after children. The reasons for this included the lack of direct work with families and services in support of reunifications and delays in court hearings. This meant that planned permanency moves were not happening.

A small number of local authorities also told us that they have seen a change in the profile of their looked after children. One LA told us “...*there has been a difference in the age range of our children becoming Looked After during this period being slightly older teenagers which has given us a placement challenge.*”

## Key themes from open question responses

These findings are derived from the open text questions in the survey. One of the questions asked about the ‘steps local authorities have been taking to safeguard children that they are not in contact with’ and the other asks about any ‘trends, challenges and good practice’. Not all local authorities responded to the questions, and those that did so provided views reflecting the unique circumstances and challenges in their area. This may not be comprehensive of all issues, nor reflective of views and practices of all local authorities. A note of caution should therefore be exercised when reading these findings.

## Working with coronavirus (COVID-19) and the future

In the early waves of the survey local authorities told us about their alternative working arrangements in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and about their recovery plans.

Local authorities told us that they risk assessed and RAG rated their cases and these informed the scheduling and mode of social work visits (carried out virtually and face to face where possible). To stay in touch, alternative forms of communication, for example telephone calls and WhatsApp were used and some local authorities provided children and families with new technology to enable this. Early recovery plans focused on incremental approaches to direct work, gradual reopening of offices and requests for government guidance to assist them with these.

In more recent survey waves, local authorities reported that working arrangements and recovery planning involve:

- moving from a crisis response towards ‘business as usual living with coronavirus (COVID-19)’,
- reassessing the required intensity of visiting children and families and reviewing all cases since the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to understand the current level

of risk and put in place contingency plans to ensure the right support is provided to children, young people and families,

- relying more on their usual assessment and planning processes as we have come out of lockdown to ensure that children's changing needs are met,
- taking a "blended" approach to visits which comprises of both virtual and face to face contact. However, in the most recent wave of the survey, many local authorities reported that all visits would be face to face unless there are ongoing health concerns of staff or family.
- updating safety procedures and making adjustments to buildings to ensure they are coronavirus (COVID-19) safe. One local authority told us that *"staff in Children's Social Care have been risk assessed to increase safe physical face to face contact with families as lockdown eases"*.
- contingency activities in preparation of an increase in demand as schools return in September
- gathering intelligence on and reviewing and resetting priorities. One local authority told us that they have developed a coronavirus (COVID-19) *"specific audit programme to quality assure the impact of delivering services differently... we envisage the audit will inform our service delivery and help us to understand the children and family needs better."*

## Adolescents

- Local authorities provided positive examples of working virtually with young people and some are finding that older teens prefer virtual contacts. One local authority said that *"there has been further feedback from children that they would want the virtual offer to continue"*.
- In the early waves of the survey, ensuring lockdown and social distancing compliance amongst teenagers was a challenge for some local authorities. Some local authorities told us *"this older cohort is difficult to engage and many have expressed their dismay at the increased frequency of contact as 'harassment'"*.
- In later survey waves some local authorities told us how prolonged lockdown is affecting young people, including increased mental ill health issues and anxieties about schooling and education.

## Working with schools and other safeguarding partners

- Across the survey waves, local authorities provided additional examples of joint working between Children's Social Care, schools and other safeguarding teams on issues associated with the pandemic.
- In early survey waves local authorities told us how they were working with schools to coordinate and collect information on attendance and contact with vulnerable children. In later survey waves, in some local authorities this joint working appears to be more embedded. One LA told us *"relationships and joint working with schools have improved due to twice-weekly meetings with head teachers to share*

*information about risks, needs and responses. The twice weekly consultation sessions for schools have been welcomed...*

- Local authorities have carried out activities in preparation for schools reopening in September. One local authority told us that they will re-start weekly meetings with senior teachers to *“review school attendance and agree how best to respond to increasing levels of need when children return.”*
- Local authorities provided many examples of how they have been encouraging school attendance. For example city wide media campaigns; joint messaging from children’s services and public health; guidance booklet for carers of looked after children; a multi-agency reintegration panel to support schools with pupils that might find the transition back into school challenging.
- A few local authorities told us how they supported vulnerable children and families over the summer months. This included the provision of information for families about how to access food over the school holidays, summer activity programmes and youth outreach.
- Local authorities also provided examples of how they have been working with wider safeguarding partners. For example, one local authority has a shared mailbox *“for agencies to provide information about contact with children to social workers and other partnership agencies working with the family.”* Some local authorities told us how they have set up multi-agency working groups and forums dealing with coronavirus (COVID-19) issues.



## Annex A: survey questions and time periods

The latest version of the survey is shown below. All local authorities were asked to complete the form.

### Question 1

How many children looked after, children on a protection plan and other children in need do you have in the following groups?

- a) have had their plan reviewed in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?
- b) have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 2 weeks?
- c) have been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 4 weeks?

What steps are you taking to safeguard those children that you are not in contact with?

### Question 2

How many of the following staff are employed by your local authority and approximately what proportion of them are not working at the moment due to coronavirus (COVID-19) (FTE)? Choose from: 0-10%, 11-20%, 21%-30%, 31-40%, 41-50%, 51-60%, 61-70%, 71-80%, 81-90%, 91-100%.

- a) Social workers - permanent or agency
- b) Residential care staff

### Question 3

In the last week, what do you estimate has been the increase, if any, in your weekly costs for looked after children due to additional pressures caused by coronavirus (COVID-19)? For each part, choose one of the available options: 10% or less, 11-20%, 21% or more, no increase, don't know.

- a) Foster care placements
- b) Residential care placements

### Question 4

How many referrals to children's social care services you received in the week before last?

### Question 5

Please tell us about the source of referrals received in the week before last:

Referral Source:

- a) Individual
- b) Schools
- c) Health services
- d) Police
- e) Other

**Question 6**

How many children started to be looked-after in the week before last?

**Question 7**

Use this space to tell us about any other trends, challenges and best practice that you wish to share (open text – 3000 character limit)

**Question 8**

Use this space if you would like to tell us how you have calculated any of these data items and any assumptions that you have made

**Table A1: Time periods referred to in questions**

Wave	Questions referring to:				
	Collection dates	Last 2 weeks	Last 4 weeks	Last week	Week before last
Wave 1	04 - 06 May	20 April - 03 May	-	27 April - 03 May	-
Wave 2	18 - 20 May	04 - 17 May	-	11 - 17 May	-
Wave 3	01 - 03 June	18 - 31 May	04 - 31 May	25 - 31 May	18 - 24 May
Wave 4	15 - 17 June	01 - 14 June	18 May - 14 June	08 - 14 June	01 - 07 June
Wave 5	29 June - 01 July	15 - 28 June	01 - 28 June	22 - 28 June	15 - 21 June
Wave 6	13-15 July	29 June - 12 July	15 June - 12 July	6 - 12 July	29 June - 05 July
Wave 7	27 - 29 July	13 - 26 July	29 June - 26 July	20 - 26 July	13 - 19 July
Wave 8	24 - 26 August	10 - 23 August	27 July - 23 August	17 - 23 August	10 - 16 August

## Annex B: response rates

**Table B1: overall survey response rates**

	Number of local authorities	Percentage of local authorities
Wave 1	149	99%
Wave 2	147	97%
Wave 3	149	99%
Wave 4	149	99%
Wave 5	149	99%
Wave 6	149	99%
Wave 7	149	99%
Wave 8	145	96%

**Table B2: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1a**

	Cases reviewed		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
Wave 1	129	130	128
Wave 2	137	137	136
Wave 3	141	141	140
Wave 4	143	143	141
Wave 5	146	146	143
Wave 6	146	146	145
Wave 7	146	146	146
Wave 8	142	142	141

**Table B3: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1b**

	Seen or contacted a social worker in the last two weeks		
	Children looked after	Children on a child protection plan	Other children in need
Wave 1	130	134	131
Wave 2	136	136	135
Wave 3	141	141	140
Wave 4	143	144	142
Wave 5	145	145	143
Wave 6	147	147	145
Wave 7	147	147	145
Wave 8	143	143	141

**Table B4: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 1c**

	<b>Seen or contacted a social worker in the last four weeks</b>		
	<b>Children looked after</b>	<b>Children on a child protection plan</b>	<b>Other children in need</b>
Wave 1	-	-	-
Wave 2	-	-	-
Wave 3	138	138	138
Wave 4	139	140	139
Wave 5	141	141	140
Wave 6	146	146	144
Wave 7	147	147	145
Wave 8	143	143	141

**Table B5: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 2**

	<b>Proportion not working due to coronavirus (COVID-19)</b>	
	<b>Social workers</b>	<b>Residential care workers</b>
Wave 1	140	114
Wave 2	144	115
Wave 3	146	103
Wave 4	147	104
Wave 5	146	104
Wave 6	147	104
Wave 7	147	104
Wave 8	142	99

**Table B6: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 3**

	<b>Increase in weekly costs due to coronavirus (COVID-19)</b>	
	<b>Foster placements</b>	<b>Residential care</b>
Wave 1	130	129
Wave 2	134	134
Wave 3	139	138
Wave 4	140	139
Wave 5	139	137
Wave 6	137	137
Wave 7	139	138
Wave 8	137	138

**Table B7: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 4 and 5**

	Number and source of referrals to children's social care
Wave 1	147
Wave 2	145
Wave 3	147
Wave 4	147
Wave 5	147
Wave 6	146
Wave 7	146
Wave 8	143

Note: Survey data for some local authorities was removed due to known data quality issues.

**Table B8: Number of local authorities that responded to Question 6**

	Children starting to be looked after
Wave 1	149
Wave 2	147
Wave 3	149
Wave 4	149
Wave 5	149
Wave 6	149
Wave 7	149
Wave 8	145



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